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ABSTRACT

The current research and policy debate over why teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined in the 1990s has focused on whether increased abstinence or increased contraceptive use is primarily responsible. This research brief indicates that both factors appear to be contributing factors. It finds that: (1) the percentage of teens who reported ever having had sexual intercourse declined for both males and females from 1988 to 1995; (2) the majority of male and female sexually experienced teens had either 0 or 1 partner in the past year; and (3) the percentage of female teens who reported using any method of contraceptive at first sexual encounter increased between 1982 and 1995. On the other hand, the brief also notes less promising trends, including: (1) a decline in the percentage of female teens who report using any method of contraception at their most recent sex encounter; (2) an increase in the percentage of teens having sex before age 15; and (3) an increase risk for Hispanic teens of teen pregnancy. The proportion of Hispanic teens who are sexually experienced has increased, but they are the least likely to use any form of contraception at first sex encounter or most recent sex encounter. Finally, the brief highlights recommendations, including the following: (1) employ multiple strategies to reduce teen pregnancy; (2) support programs to increase involvement among males in decision-making about contraceptive use; (3) emphasize to teens the need to use contraception consistently; (4) develop strategies to discourage sex among young teens; and (5) target more programs specifically to address needs of different racial/ethnic and cultural groups. (Contains 11 references.) (EV)

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Trends in Sexual Activity and Contraceptive Use Among Teens.

Policymakers, the public, and parents have welcomed news of declining teen pregnancy rates and teen birth rates in the 1990s. Declines have occurred among all age groups, among all racial/ethnic groups, and in every state and the District of Columbia. Both increased use of contraception and increased abstinence among teens are contributing to this decline, although the relative contributions of the two approaches continue to be debated. In this brief, researchers at Child Trends examine the data on teen sexual activity and contraceptive use to help understand recent trends in teen pregnancy and childbearing.

Sexual Activity Among Teens

This report distinguishes between *sexual experience* and *sexual activity*:

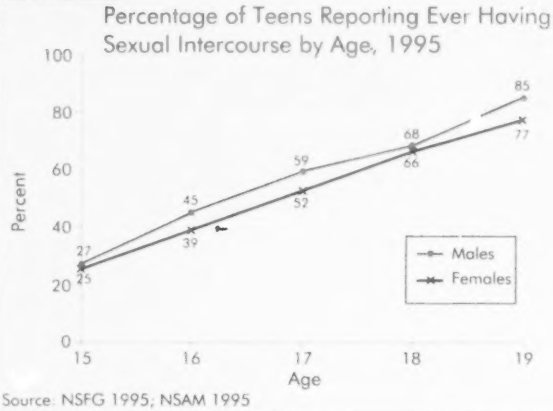
- A sexually experienced teen has had sexual intercourse at least once in his or her lifetime.
- A sexually active teen has had sexual intercourse in the past 3 months.

Sexually Experienced Teens

The percentage of teens reporting that they have ever had sex increases with age. At every age, a higher percentage of males than females are sexually experienced. In 1995,

- About a quarter of all 15-year-olds reported that they had had sex at least once (27 percent of males and 25 percent of females).
- By age 17, more than half of males (59 percent) and females (52 percent) reported that they had ever had sex.
- By age 19, 85 percent of males and 77 percent of females reported that they had ever had sex (see Figure 1).[10]

FIGURE 1



Source: NSFG 1995; NSAM 1995

Overall declines in teen sexual experience. Between 1988 and 1995, the percentage of male and female teens who were sexually experienced declined slightly. The percentage of female teens who had ever had sex declined from 53 percent in 1988 to 50 percent in 1995. The percentage of male teens who were sexually experienced also declined, from 60 percent to 55 percent. The recent declines in sexual experience follow a long period of increasing proportions of teens who had ever had sex. For example, the percentage of sexually experienced female teens increased between 1982 and 1988 (see Figure 2).[2,3,8]

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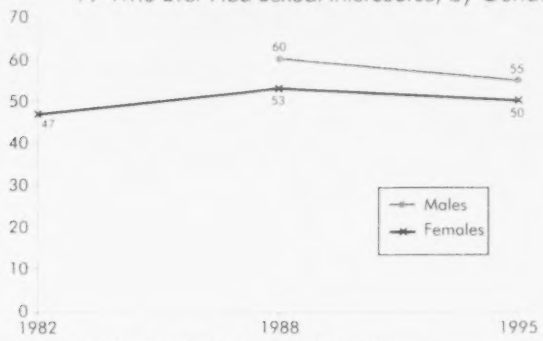
FIGURE 2

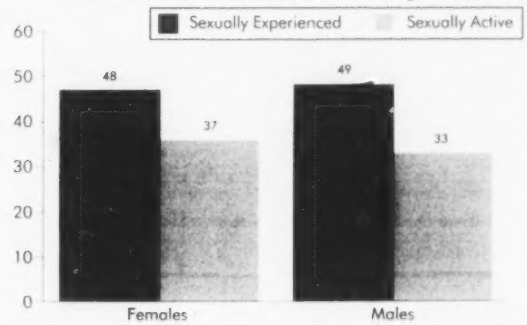
Trends in Percentage of Adolescents aged 15-19 Who Ever Had Sexual Intercourse, by Gender



Source: Females: NSFG 1982, 1988, 1995 Males: NSAM 1988, 1995

FIGURE 3

Percentage of High School Students Who Are Sexually Experienced and Sexually Active, 1997



Source: YRBS 1997

FIGURE 4

Number of Partners in Last 12 Months of Sexually Experienced Adolescents Ages 15-19, 1995

Source: NSFG 1995; NSAM 1995

Increase in sexual experience at early ages. Despite overall declines in the proportion of teens who were sexually experienced, there has been an alarming increase in the percentage of teens who report having sex at an early age. Almost one-fifth of female teens (19 percent) in 1995 reported that they had had sex before age 15, compared with only 11 percent in 1988. Males, however, did not show a similar increase. In 1988 and in 1995, approximately 21 percent of males reported having sex before age 15.[3]

Increasing sexual experience among Hispanic females. White and black teens show declines in sexual experience between 1988 and 1995.* However, Hispanic females show an increase in sexual experience between 1988 (49 percent) and 1995 (55 percent). In 1995, white teens were the least likely to be sexually experienced (50 percent), followed by Hispanic teens (55 percent), and black teens (60 percent).[8,2]

Sexually Active Teens

Not all sexually experienced teens are currently sexually active. While close to half of high school males and females were sexually experienced (had ever had sexual intercourse) in 1997, only 37 percent of females and 33 percent of males were sexually active (had had sex in the last 3 months) (see Figure 3).[4]

Number of Partners. Among sexually experienced teens in 1995, 8 to 10 percent had no partners in the past year, indicating that they were not currently sexually active. The majority of sexually experienced teens had either 0 or 1 partners in the past year (54 percent of males and 70 percent of females). However, 20 percent of teen males and 13 percent of teen females had 3 or more partners in the past year (See Figure 4).[10]

Differences by gender. From 1990 to 1997, the percentage of high school males who were sexually active steadily declined from 43 percent in 1990 to 33 percent in 1997. In contrast, female high school students show a mixed trend for these same years. Although the percentage of females who were sexually active is similar in 1990 and 1997, this percentage rose from 1990-1995 before falling to 1990 levels in 1997.[4,5,6,7]

* In this brief, white and black refer to non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black unless otherwise noted.

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Contraceptive Use Among Teens

This report uses two measures of contraceptive use for different populations of teens.

- Contraceptive use at first sex, among sexually experienced teens who ever had sex.
- Contraceptive use at most recent sex among sexually active teens who had sex in the past 3 months.

Contraceptive Use at First Sex

Dramatic increases in contraceptive use at first sex. There has been a dramatic increase in the percentage of adolescent females who report using any contraceptive method at first sex. In 1982, less than half of females ages 15-19 used contraception at first sex (48 percent). By 1995, three-quarters of teens (76 percent) reported they used some form of contraception at first sex (see Figure 6).[1,8]

Increases in contraceptive use among all racial/ethnic groups. Contraceptive use at first sex increased over time among female teens of all racial/ethnic groups, although there were differences in contraceptive use across groups. In 1995, Hispanics were the least likely to use any form of contraception at first sexual intercourse (58 percent) compared with blacks (68 percent) and whites (82 percent).[1]

Dramatic increases in condom use. The majority of the increase in contraceptive use at first sex is due to condom use. Condom use at first sex among teen females nearly tripled, from only 23 percent in 1982 to 63 percent in 1995 (see Figure 5).[1,8] Results from the National Survey of Adolescent Males have also shown a dramatic increase in condom use at first sex. In 1988, 55 percent of sexually experienced males reported using either a condom alone or a condom with another method. By 1995, this percentage increased to 69 percent of sexually experienced males.[11]

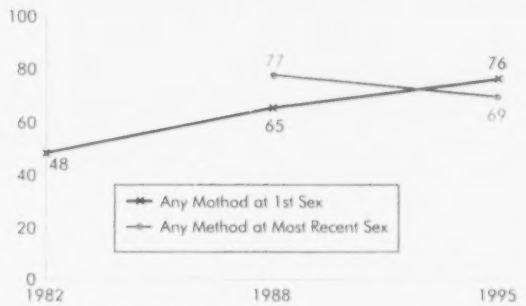
FIGURE 5

Trends in Contraceptive Use at First Sex Among Females Ages 15-19

Source: NSFG 1982, 1988, 1995 * Not available before NSGF 1995

FIGURE 6

Trends in Contraceptive Use at First Sex and Most Recent Sex Among Females Ages 15-19



Source: NSFG 1982, 1988, 1995

The percentage of females using the pill at first sex has remained constant over time from 1982 to 1995 at approximately 8 percent. In addition, the use of withdrawal as a contraceptive method at first sex has decreased over the years from 13 percent in 1982 to only 4 percent in 1995. Use of Norplant and Depo Provera (hormonal implants and injectables that became available in the early 1990s) represents a very small percentage of contraceptive use at first sex (less than 1 percent) (see Figure 5).[1,8]

Differences in contraceptive method by race/ethnicity. Black females were more likely to be using the pill at first sex (15 percent) than Hispanics (3 percent) or whites (8 percent). Whites, on the other hand, were more likely to use condoms at first sex (71 percent) than either blacks (48 percent) or Hispanics (50 percent).[1]

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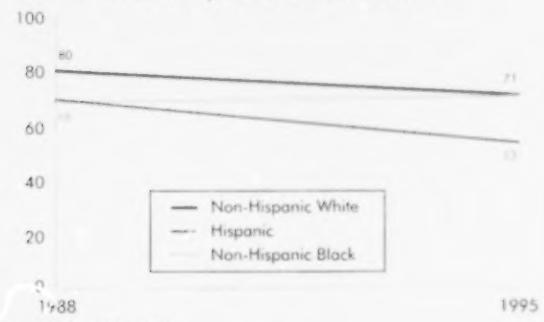
FIGURE 7

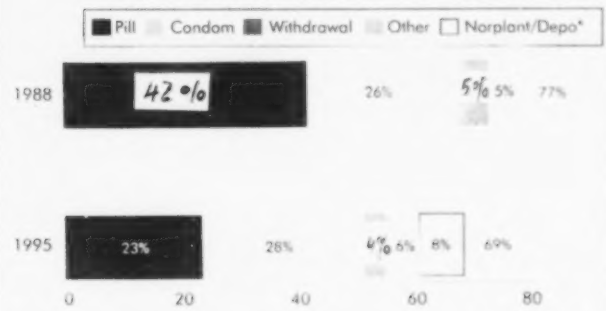
Contraceptive Use at Most Recent Sex Among Sexually Active Females Ages 15-19 by Race/Ethnicity in 1988 and 1995



Source: NSFG 1988, 1995

FIGURE 8

Contraceptive Use at Most Recent Sex Among Sexually Active Females Ages 15-19, 1988 and 1995



Source: NSFG 1988, 1995 * Not available before NSFG 1995

Contraceptive Use at Most Recent Sex

Contraceptive use at most recent sex is declining. Despite dramatic increases in contraceptive use at first sex among sexually experienced teens, there has been a decline in contraceptive use *at most recent sex* among sexually active teens (see Figure 6).[1,8] NSFG data indicate that the proportion of sexually active female teens who used contraception at most recent sex declined from 77 percent in 1988 to 69 percent in 1995. In other words, almost one-third (31 percent) of adolescent females reported no contraceptive use at their most recent sexual intercourse.

Racial/ethnic differences. Black teens were the only racial/ethnic group that did not show a decline in contraceptive use at most recent sex (see Figure 7).[1] Between 1988 and 1995, the proportion of sexually active black teen females who used any contraceptive method at most recent sex increased slightly, from 68 percent to 70 percent. In comparison, contraceptive use at most recent sex decreased 16 percentage points among Hispanic teens, from 69 percent to 53 percent. White teens had a 9 percentage point decline in contraceptive use at most recent sex (from 80 percent to 71 percent).[1]

Changing contraceptive methods. Between 1988 and 1995, use of the birth control pill at most recent sex declined dramatically, from 42 percent to 23 percent. This decline was offset, in part, by use of Norplant and Depo Provera (8 percent in 1995), which have only been available since the early 1990s. Condom use at most recent sex remained fairly stable between 1988 (26 percent) and 1995 (28 percent) (see Figure 8).[8]

Consistency of contraceptive use. In 1995, two-thirds (70 percent) of sexually active teen females who were using the pill reported they never missed a pill in the past three months. Among all sexually active teens, 13 percent missed 1 pill in the past 3 months and 17 percent missed 2 or more pills. However, consistency of pill use differs by age. Three-quarters (74 percent) of sexually active females aged 18-19 reported consistent pill use compared with only 58 percent of 15 to 17 year olds (see Figure 9).[2]

Summary

The current research and policy debate over why teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined in the 1990s has focused on whether increased abstinence (i.e. reduced levels of sexual activity) or increased contraceptive use (or improved contraceptive methods) is primarily responsible for these positive trends. The positive news is that both factors appear to be contributing to the decline in teen pregnancy:

- The percentage of teens who reported ever having had sexual intercourse

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FIGURE 9

Number of Birth Control Pills Missed Among Sexually Active Teen Females Where the Pill was the Sole Contraceptive Used, 1995

Source: NSFG 1995

declined for both males and females from 1988 to 1995.

- The majority of male and female sexually experienced teens had either 0 or 1 partner(s) in the past year.
- The percentage of female teens who reported using any method of contraception at first sex increased between 1982 and 1995. Similar increases occurred among males.
- New long-term hormonal contraceptive methods, Norplant and Depo Provera, are being used by sexually active teens.

But these data also show some less-promising trends in teen sexual activity and contraceptive use. In particular:

- There has been a decline in the percentage of female teens who report using any method of contraception at most recent sex, even as the percentage of teens using contraception the first time they have sex is increasing. This suggests that a significant percentage of sexually active teens are not acting on the message that avoiding pregnancy depends on consistent use of contraception.
- There has been an increase in the percentage of teens having sex at a very young age – before age 15. This raises questions about the nature of these sexual encounters, specifically whether they were consensual or coercive. Girls who are sexually experienced at a young age are also less likely to use contraception and thus more likely to become pregnant.
- Hispanic teens appear at increasing risk of teen pregnancy. The proportion of Hispanic teens who are sexually experienced has increased, in contrast to black and white teens, who show declines in sexual experience. Further, when Hispanic teens become sexually experienced, they are the least likely to use any form of contraception at first sex or at most recent sex. The Hispanic teen birth rate rose substantially during the 1990s and has only begun to fall in the last couple of years.

These findings suggest several avenues for policy makers and service providers, including:

- Employ multiple strategies to reduce teen pregnancy, recognizing that some teens will respond to a message of abstinence while others will respond to improved access to contraception.
- Employ programs to increase involvement among males in decision-making about contraceptive use.
- Emphasize to teens the need to use contraception consistently – every time they have sex – to avoid pregnancy.
- Develop strategies that will successfully discourage sex among young teens, who are less likely than older teens to use contraception consistently and for whom first sex is more often non-voluntary.
- Target more programs specifically to address needs of different racial/ethnic and cultural groups.

Note: This brief summarizes recent trends in teen sexual activity and contraceptive use, using data from three national surveys: the National Survey of Family Growth, 1982, 1988, and 1995 (NSFG), the National Survey of Adolescent Males, 1988 and 1995 (NSAM), and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1990, 1993, and 1995 (YRBS).

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This research brief was writen by Elizabeth Terry, MPP and Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D. It summarizes a longer paper, *Trends in Sexual Activity and Contracpetive Use Among Teens*, presented at "Messages and Methods for the New Millenium: A Round Table on Adolescents and Contraception." The full paper is forthcoming from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Visit their website: www.teenpregnancy.org.

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